

# Why did Socrates have to die?

## Politics, philosophy, and drinking-parties in Xenophon

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*Different writers produced very different images of Socrates – wise teacher or anti-democratic sophist – and therefore very different explanations of why democratic Athens executed him in 399 B.C. His pupil Xenophon's depiction of Socrates, both before and during his trial, offers a very unusual explanation of why Socrates had to die, and one which tells us a lot about fourth-century politics. Compare this with Plato's philosophical explanation of why Socrates had to die in James Warren's article, preceding this one.*

Socrates was executed following convictions for 'introducing new gods' and 'corrupting the young' in 399 B.C. His private prosecutors probably felt that he bore some responsibility for the short-lived but murderous anti-democratic uprising of 404. He had been the teacher of Critias, the ring-leader of this pro-Spartan oligarchy, or rule by the few, which was known as 'The Thirty Tyrants'. He also taught Charmides, another member of the Thirty. Fifty years after Socrates' death, the Athenian politician Aeschines was happy to refer to 'the sophist Socrates' in a lawcourt speech. Sophists were highly paid teachers of rhetoric and radical ideas, who are usually portrayed in our sources as dishonest, corrupting threats to order and honesty in Athens. Aeschines reminded Athenians that Socrates was killed because 'he was shown to have been the teacher of Critias, one of the Thirty who subverted your democracy'. This shows that Socrates' alleged indoctrination of anti-democratic revolutionaries was perceived to be the real reason for his prosecution.

### Oh my God! They killed Socrates! (You b\*\*\*\*\*s)

In 403–2, the restored democracy had specifically passed a law to prevent the legal pursuit of those who had connections with the Thirty. This 'amnesty' was key to a 'truth and reconciliation' process, which allowed Athens to move on from the deaths and divisions which Critias and his gang had provoked. It also meant, in theory at least, that those who had been sympathetic to the ideology of the Thirty but who had not themselves done anyone any harm would not be prosecuted simply for having anti-democratic thoughts. Why, then, did a democratic jury allow Socrates to be tried and killed? This question has haunted generations of pro-democratic intellectuals and scholars because Socrates' death is seen as an example of not-very-democratic intolerance to freedom of expression. The incident also raises the troubling question of whether a teacher can be blamed for the subsequent behaviour of his or her pupils.

Our surviving sources do not offer us clear-cut answers to these questions because they are so concerned either to paint Socrates as an innocent and misunderstood martyr or, like Aeschines, to represent his execution as a perfectly reasonable response to subversion. However, the sympathetic depictions of Socrates written by his former friends Plato and Xenophon are valuable evidence precisely *because* they are so biased. What they tell us is that Socrates' beliefs and actions *required* defence and explanation after his death. We should remember that

Socrates never wrote anything down himself. Without Plato and Xenophon, then, we would probably think that Socrates deserved to die because he was an ultra-right-wing intellectual who brainwashed young men into inexcusable acts of political violence. But we will also see that Xenophon's response to Socrates' life and death in Athens is shaped by Xenophon's own tricky relationship with his native city.

### The life and crimes of Xenophon

Xenophon's life-experience (c. 430–352) would have made him particularly interested in Socrates' story. Xenophon was certainly involved with the Thirty to some degree. But he expressed criticism of this regime in his history of Greece (the *Hellenica*) and in his memoir of Socrates (the *Memorabilia*). We know that he then fought as a mercenary general for Cyrus' rebellion in Persia in 401. It is possible that this adventure was motivated by a desire to get out of Athens now that democracy was restored and things were getting hot for those who had supported the other side. Xenophon went on to fight for Sparta as a mercenary. Unsurprisingly, he was then exiled from Athens. He settled in Sparta but lost his home there too and ended up in Corinth. The Athenians ended his sentence of exile and his sons were made citizens and served in the Athenian cavalry. We do not know if Xenophon ever returned to Athens.

### Drinking-parties and memoirs

Xenophon's *Symposium* is a second-hand account of a drinking party which supposedly took place in 422. In it, Socrates moderates the talk and behaviour of his nine young companions with wit and tact. This very affable Socrates speaks of love and virtue among gentlemen. It is striking that one of his fellow drinkers is Niceratus – he had always aligned himself with the democrats and was to be killed by the Thirty. Another guest is Charmides himself. At this point in his life, he is much more interested in sex than politics. In going back to a time when all of these men were friendly enough to drink, boast, and get rather randy with each other, Xenophon paints a subtle picture of Socrates as a harmonizing and very unpolitical influence. He implies that whatever it was that eventually caused the likes of Charmides to have the likes of Niceratus killed, Socrates was not to blame. And Socrates is chronologically the last of *four* men at this party who died as a direct result of the upheavals of 404–3. This helps to paint Socrates as a victim of a horrid chain of events rather than as the cause of it.

In the *Memorabilia*, a collection of 'memories' of conversations with Socrates, Xenophon admits that Critias became 'one of the most violent and avaricious of all the oligarchs' but is adamant that Socrates could not be held responsible for this man's actions. Critias only went to the bad once he had left Socrates' influence and he used Socrates for his own ends. Xenophon also refers to charges of anti-democratic teaching

which were clearly circulating *after* Socrates' death. This is revealing for two reasons: firstly, it shows that Plato and Xenophon were partly writing to rebut other texts which were specifically designed to justify Socrates' death. Secondly, Xenophon's rebuttal lets it slip that the philosopher favoured political rule by suitably qualified experts. And he never denies the charge that Socrates attacked the key Athenian democratic practice of holding office by lot. Thus Xenophon gives us hints as to what got his mentor into trouble at the same time as he distances him from Critias. The game here was to defend Socrates whilst making Athenian reactions to him completely understandable.

### The best defence? Xenophon's *Apology*

Plato and Xenophon both wrote *Defences* (often called *Apologies*, but nothing to do with saying sorry) which claim to be accounts of Socrates' speeches in his trial. Both writers agree that Socrates did little to garner sympathy from the jury but did much to antagonize it. Unlike Plato, Xenophon explicitly acknowledges that Socrates adopted an 'arrogant tone'. He explains this by saying that Socrates had already decided before the trial that now was the right time for him to die. Socrates explains to his friends that he does not want the pain of old age or to be a burden to others. He is confident that he has lived a completely pious and morally blameless life. He boasts of his reputation for integrity. Socrates refers to his own inner 'divinity' – a godlike 'voice' which advises him what to do. This voice tells him not to prepare his defence in a way which will help to get him acquitted.

In Xenophon's extracts from the defence speeches, we hear Socrates vigorously denying the charges against him: his inner 'voice' is not a 'new god' but just another example of divine communication like omens or oracles. However, Socrates' arrogance starts to come through when he says that the information he has received from this 'voice' has never been wrong. The jurors go into uproar at this. Some of them didn't believe the claim while others were jealous that Socrates had received greater attention from the gods than they. Instead of backing off from the outcry, Xenophon continues, Socrates cranked up the jury's anger and disbelief even further by adding that the Delphic oracle had once proclaimed him to be 'the most free, upright, and prudent of all people'.

The approach of Xenophon's Socrates to the charge of subverting the young is just as snooty and boastful. He then refuses to suggest a lesser punishment of exile to the jury should he be found guilty on the grounds that this would look like an admission of guilt. It was normal in Athenian trials for defendants to plead for alternative punishments, and while Socrates' strategy here might seem nobly uncompromising to us, it would probably have seemed very disrespectful to an Athenian jury. Xenophon concludes that Socrates' arrogance 'invited the

jurors' ill-will and forced them to condemn him'. Surprisingly for an author who was clearly no fan of democracy but was a devotee of Socrates, Xenophon does not seem to blame the jury for what they did.

Xenophon's account here cannot be trusted for its historical accuracy any more than Plato's. But it is highly significant that he chooses to play up Socrates' boasting and haughtiness and the reasons behind them. When we put the *Apology* next to the *Memorabilia* it is tempting to think that Xenophon wanted his readers to conclude that Socrates was put to death primarily because he deliberately provoked the jury with a show of arrogance.

A bold and dramatic representation in which Socrates manipulated the emotions of a democratic jury simply because he wanted to avoid the deteriorations of old age was a good way of altering existing perceptions of the trial. His arrogance thereby became a temporary and tactical mask rather than evidence of elitist disdain towards the people. And if the jury could be represented as understandably resentful of religious and intellectual arrogance rather than as a vengeful and stupid mob then so much the better for Xenophon. Xenophon himself had done so much to make Athenians regard him as their enemy that this sympathetic portrait of a sorely provoked democratic jury was perhaps a first step towards reconciliation and forgiveness between Xenophon and his native city.

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### Xenophon's works involving Socrates

*Hellenica*: a history of Greece in the late 5th and early 4th century B.C., picking up where Thucydides stops, including the end of the Peloponnesian War, the 'Thirty Tyrants', and the death of Socrates.

*Symposium*: description of a drinking party set in 422 B.C., attended by Socrates.

*Memorabilia*: 'recollections' or 'memorable events', describing various conversations – real or fictional – with Socrates.

*Apology* or *Defence*: Xenophon's version of Socrates' defence speech from his trial in 399 B.C.; also the title of Plato's version of the same speech.

### The leading players

Socrates: Athenian philosopher, executed in 399 B.C. for corrupting the young and introducing new gods.

Xenophon: Athenian politician, soldier, mercenary, writer, and follower of Socrates.

Critias: Athenian politician, one of the 'Thirty Tyrants', pupil of Socrates and ring-leader of the anti-democratic revolution of 404, killed in battle in 403.

Charmides: nephew of Critias, pupil of Socrates, also aided with the revolution and died in the same battle as his uncle.

Aeschines: Athenian orator and politician of the mid- to late fourth century.

Niceratus: Athenian, executed by the 'Thirty Tyrants'.